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Towards sustainable forest governance in northwest Pakistan

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Abstract: Pakistan has only a meagre amount of forest cover, and that is depleting rapidly, with ineffective governance seen as a major reason. The government of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, the country's most forested province, has carried out a series of interventions with financial and technical support from various international donors. These aim to change how forests are governed, making planning and management procedures more inclusive and participatory. But these initiatives have faced many challenges: mistrust and conflicts between state officials and local forest users, unclear forest rights, dominance of customary regulations in many areas, and a lack of economic and developmental incentives.

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research evidence for policy



People living near forests depend heavily on forest resources.
Photo: Babar Shahbaz

Towards sustainable forest governance in northwest Pakistan

north
NCCR
south



Case studies featured here were conducted in Pakistan.

Policy message

- Customary regulations, entitlements and power relations play important roles in local forest-use practices. The design and implementation of forest policies should carefully analyse and consider these issues.
- Unclear arrangements for land and forest tenure are among the main barriers to the effective implementation of joint forest management initiatives.
- Active participation (independent from state forest authorities) and dialogue among a broad spectrum of forest stakeholders are vital for sustainable forest governance.
- **Pakistan has only a meagre amount of forest cover, and that is depleting rapidly, with ineffective governance seen as a major reason. The government of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, the country's most forested province, has carried out a series of interventions with financial and technical support from various international donors. These aim to change how forests are governed, making planning and management procedures more inclusive and participatory. But these initiatives have faced many challenges: mistrust and conflicts between state officials and local forest users, unclear forest rights, dominance of customary regulations in many areas, and a lack of economic and developmental incentives.**
- **Vanishing forests**
 - Most of Pakistan's natural forests are located in the mountainous Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province, in the north-west of the country. These forests are vanishing rapidly, though there is disagreement on exactly how fast.
 - Rising demand for forest products is putting pressure on the remaining forests. The provincial authorities' top-down approach to forest administration, inherited from the colonial period, cannot manage the present challenges in supply and demand, and is a key problem hindering sustainable forestry.
 - Various bilateral and multilateral donor agencies have put institutional reforms

at the centre of their development projects. As a result, in the mid-1990s the provincial Forest Department started a "forest reform process" to institutionalise participatory forestry. This introduced approaches such as village land use planning and joint forest management at the local level. Within the Forest Department itself, an ambitious matrix structure was introduced to combine technical aspects of forestry with participatory, decentralised and gender-sensitive planning and forest management. A new Forest Policy and Forest Ordinance provided the legal coverage to these reforms.

Featured case studies

Traditional practice vs law

The state claims ownership of forests and declares they are protected, and grants royalties from timber sales to “rights-holders”. But in many parts of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, everyday decisions on who can use the forests and benefit from them are rooted in traditional institutions like *riwaj* (customary practices) and the *jirga* (council of tribal elders). In Swat district, former “owners” continue to claim significant rights (Sultan-i-Rome 2005). These traditional regulations have not been taken as the starting point for developing forest management strategies and policies; instead rules and policies rooted in the colonial period have been superimposed, without considering local realities. Institutional reforms brought by donors have generally failed because they were unaware of the underlying tensions and local practices. As a result, the levels of mistrust and confrontation between local forest users and state officials have risen (Geiser 2006).

Neutral facilitation for bottom-up dialogue

Various stakeholders have different claims and entitlements to forests in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa: they include various power groups within the local communities, NGOs, community-based organisations, traditional and religious institutions, state agencies and donors. The state and donors fail to engage in holistic dialogue with local actors and institutions in a neutral and independent environment. New policies and laws are formulated exclusively by state officials and outside experts. Action research by NCCR North-South found that more neutral venues and independent mediators (researchers and NGO staff) can help bridge the gaps in interests. Starting at the village level, this research gradually extended the scope of dialogue up to the provincial and national level. It successfully raised the concerns of local stakeholders at provincial level. Sensitising the local media and politicians also proved very effective.

- But this reform process failed. At local
- level, village land use planning and
- joint forest management became
- operational only in a few model cases,
- and even here, actual participatory
- procedures rarely emerged (Shahbaz
- 2009). Within the Forest Department,
- the new matrix structure remained
- largely a plan. In addition, continued
- deforestation and conflicts between
- state officials and local forest users
- indicate the general futility of the
- decade-long reform process.

Underlying challenges

- While more participatory forest
- governance is indeed needed, NCCR
- North-South research shows that a
- series of underlying issues inhibit the
- emergence of sustainable, inclusive
- forest governance. We describe some
- of the main conflicts here.

Unclear and contested forest rights

- Ownership rights and tenure arrange-
- ments for forests are either outdated
- or have never been clarified. “Forest
- settlement”, i.e., the delineation of
- forests and the clarification of rights,
- either took place in the early 20th
- century (e.g., in Hazara division), or
- has not yet taken place at all (e.g., in
- Malakand division), even though it is
- required by the new Forest Ordinance
- (Nasir 2006). Many local forest users
- claim that customary regulations and
- the user rights that they have inherited
- are valid, and reject the state’s claims.

Historically rooted mistrust

- After independence, the government
- of Pakistan retained the top-down
- forest management policies promul-
- gated in the Subcontinent during
- colonial rule (Geiser 2006). Though the
- present provincial and national forest
- policies emphasise the need for partici-
- patory forest governance, actual
- practice still reflects this colonial
- approach. The provincial Forest
- Department continues to practise a
- rigid, hierarchical forest administra-
- tion; it was the only department that
- did not join the decentralised local
- government arrangements that were
- functional until 2010. This created a
- gap between the local people and
- forest functionaries, and confrontation
- between local forest users and the
- state continued. Even within the new
- institutions (such as joint forest
-

management) the state still holds key powers (Shahbaz 2009).

Many stakeholders, different interests

Besides the Forest Department, a whole array of individuals and organisations have a stake in the province’s forest resources. They include local people who use the forest (e.g., rights-holders, landless people, pastoralists), timber merchants, the local wood industry, NGOs and civil society groups, traditional institutions (such as the *jirga*), religious organisations, etc. There have been few or no attempts to consult these stakeholders to widen the basis of forest governance, even though such consultations are foreseen in the forest reform process that began in the mid-1990s. In addition, little or no attention is given to unequal power relations among these stakeholders. For example, local people who use forests are very diverse in terms of land ownership, customary entitlements, income, gender, religion, etc.

Protection vs development

People who live around the forests depend on them for their livelihoods. The majority of households get most of their cash income from remittances or daily wage labour, but depend on forests for fuelwood, firewood and timber for domestic use (Steimann 2005). They also graze their livestock on forest land.

As part of the forest reform process, some village development committees were tasked with managing forests through village land-use planning and joint forest management, and improving the village infrastructure. But the state forest officials were more concerned with protecting the forest than with development activities (Shahbaz 2009). So the Forest Department’s approach to forest management did not match local livelihood realities, and only a few members of the local elite benefited from the participation.

The risk of donor-driven reforms

Donor support indeed can help sensitise the government on the need of more inclusive forest governance, and can support the concerned agencies to put it into practice.



A truck transporting timber to the lowlands from the Kaghan valley in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.
Photo: Babar Shahbaz

However, the large number of donor projects and the conditionalities that donors impose have prevented the emergence of ownership among those concerned for a broad-based reform. Plus, the ready supply of donor funds have protected the forest authorities from being challenged by other forest stakeholders (Geiser and Shahbaz 2009).

Definitions

Village land use planning: A management plan prepared by the provincial Forest Department in collaboration with the local communities. The main objectives of the plan are to involve the local communities in the protection and management of the forests, carrying out developmental activities, etc.

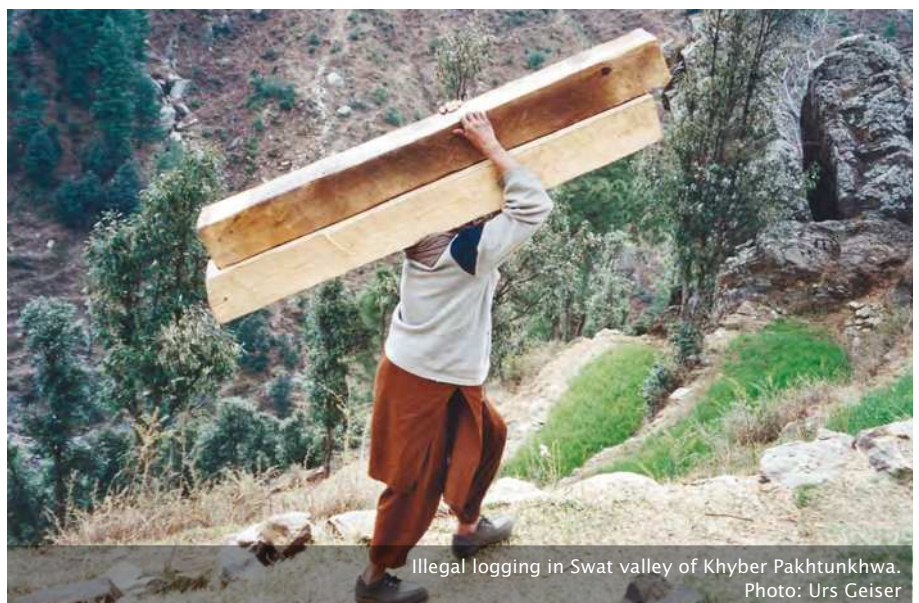
Joint forest management: Management of forest resources jointly by the state officials and local communities.

Jirga: A tribal assembly of elders that takes decisions by consensus.

Riwaj: Customary or traditional practices and regulations.

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Illegal logging in Swat valley of Khyber Pakhtunkhwa.
Photo: Urs Geiser



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Policy implications of NCCR North-South research

A less hierarchical and more inclusive form of forest governance is crucial to managing Khyber Pakhtunkhwa's forests in a sustainable manner and for addressing the urgent imbalances between supply and demand for forest products. But "inclusive" and "participation" have become catchwords, and participatory efforts by state authorities and donors rarely address underlying social and political tensions. The following issues are important for a forward-looking, inclusive approach to forest governance:

Political pressure

Officials who are keen to reform forest governance need support from a broader mobilisation outside the Forest Department. Civil society groups working on forestry issues can build such pressure. Wider media coverage (especially the Urdu-language press) can bring the forestry issues to the attention of political parties and other power groups.

Clarifying forest land rights and tenure arrangements

Unclear rights foster conflict, especially now when forest products are in high demand. The provincial government needs to take the initiative to clarify rights and tenure arrangements.

Multi-stakeholder dialogue

Stakeholder dialogues are an effective way to curtail conflicts. But they cannot be led by people with vested interests, such as forest officials. Neutral mediators and venues are essential in gaining the confidence of a wide range of stakeholders.

Strengthening the forest-livelihood linkage

Forests hold a bundle of resources, many of which are essential for the livelihoods of people who live close by, as well as further away. Forest management needs to accept the forests' multi-functionality – or should create alternative livelihood options.

Further reading

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